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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000400

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SUBJECT: ITALIAN MOD SAY LEBANESE ARMY STILL HAS A LONG WAY
TO GO

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Classified By: POL M/C David D. Pearce for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) NEA DAS Danin met with senior Italian MFA and MOD officials to discuss developments in the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and Lebanon during February 22 and 23 meetings in Rome. The Italians were receptive to the idea of establishing an informal working group (see reftel), but suggested broadening the mandate. Danin shared evidence of continued arms smuggling across the Syria-Lebanon border, and underlined the need to develop additional mechanisms to pursue full implementation of UNSCR 1701. The Italians shared our concerns, noting their troops were on the ground and that they were thus particularly sensitive to the threats. They thought a sanctions committee the most realistic/achievable option for follow-up on 1701 and lamented that the current political crisis hampers the GOL from taking stronger action to implement the resolution themselves.

¶2. (C) The Italians provided an overall favorable assessment of the UNIFIL mission, but noted some problems exist and that the LAF currently lack the capacity to take on major operations given they often lack basics such as fuel for their vehicles. On Iran, MFA DG for Political Affairs said Italy had seen the draft UNSC resolution on the nuclear issue and would support further UNSC action. End Summary.

Italian MOD: LAF Has a Long Way to Go

¶3. (C) Italian Joint Operations HQs (COI) MajGen Tommaso Ferro gave an overall positive assessment of UNIFIL operations during his February 22 briefing to Danin. Ferro stressed UNIFIL's mandate required a policy of 'neutrality' and is limited to supporting the LAF and building their capacity to take action. He said UNIFIL, which has been under Italian command since the beginning of February 2007, has a long way to go to increase the LAF's capacity to carry out serious operations, he noted they often lacked the basics such as fuel for vehicles.

¶4. (C) Ferro also noted there had been and still were some Chain of Command issues which the Italian military believe negatively impact UNIFIL's operational effectiveness. He explained that currently the UNIFIL Force Commander has a

dual Military and Civilian leadership responsibilities whereas the Italians would prefer to see the Civilian UNIFIL component placed under the Chief of Staff's Chain of Command.

On the logistics of the mission, he criticized the UN for being late in initially sending the civilian component of the mission into the theater of operation. On the positive side he said Italy thought the Strategic Military Cell in NY, staffed primarily by troop-contributing nations and currently under Italian command, was operating effectively.

MOD: "No Military Solution to Political Problem"

15. (C) When Danin asked if increased intel sharing or a possible air-UNIFIL option could help UNIFIL prevent arms smuggling and obviate the need for Israeli overflights, Ferro disagreed. He stressed UNIFIL's UN nature and need to remain neutral. Ferro doubted Israel would want to share intel with UNIFIL since doing so would be sharing intel with every UN member nation. Furthermore, Ferro argued, "you can't find a military solution to a political problem," implying a possible lack of will on the part of the LAF, due to the fragile political situation in Beirut, to take aggressive action to confront weapons smuggling.

Tri-Lateral Meetings - Not Easy, But Good

16. (C) Danin briefed on the Secretary's recent meetings in Jerusalem and Berlin. He stressed the importance of Middle East Peace to the administration, adding that the Secretary was highly motivated and actively engaged. The trilateral meetings in Jerusalem with Israeli PM Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had gone well, although they had not been easy. The Mecca agreement had made the situation more complicated, and noted that the Israelis feared being pushed

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into a process of having to negotiate with a Hamas government. But the fact that the Secretary succeeded in bringing both sides together in the same room to talk about a political horizon, and Olmert's announcement that he wanted further discussions with Abu Mazen, were two positive outcomes.

17. (C) On the Mecca agreement Danin agreed it had been important to temporarily stop intra-Palestinian violence. He added that the Palestinians themselves had urged the U.S. not to rush to embrace or denounce the agreement, but to continue the pressure, because this helps move the intra-Palestinian negotiations forward. He noted that the agreement also made Israel more reluctant to transfer impounded tax revenues and the U.S. Congress hesitant to approve U.S. funding for Palestinian security forces.

Italy Welcomes U.S. Engagement on MEPP

18. (C) The Italians expressed appreciation for the Secretary's active engagement. MFA DG for Political and

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Multilateral Affairs, Giulio Terzi, noted that Italy, and Europe in general, tend to evaluate any movement in the MEPP positively as their greatest fear is seeing the situation "stuck". They had appreciated U.S. counseling Israel not to rush to condemn the Mecca agreement before concrete results were available to be judged. The PM's diplomatic advisor for the Middle East, Marco Carnelos, echoed Terzi's evaluation, saying actions, not words would count in the end.

19. (C) Terzi stressed the need to find a way to bring humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians and improve freedom of movement. His concerns were echoed by the Director General for Middle East, Cesare Ragaglini, who noted it was also in Israel's best interests to improve

humanitarian conditions to avoid radicalizing the Palestinian population. Ragalini said the European Commission was looking into ways to improve the financial mechanisms available for delivering aid to the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. On freedom of movement, Ragaglini reported the EU was working on renewing EUBAM Rafah's mandate, which expires May 24. He noted the EU (and Italy) would like some guarantees that the crossing will be open for at least ninety percent of the time as opposed to closed for ninety percent of the time, as it is currently, before agreeing to renew the mandate. Then they hope to be able to move quickly on Karni.

Danin: Keep the Pressure On

¶10. (C) PM advisor Carnelos was careful to highlight that PM Prodi consistently supports the Quartet's three conditions in all of his conversations/statements; however Carnelos and his MFA colleagues asked if the international community might be able to give Abu Mazen more room to maneuver by adopting a more flexible interpretation on conditions necessary for lifting the embargo. Ragaglini pointed out that the PLO's original charter had called for the destruction of Israel, but years of negotiations had moderated their platform. He hoped the IC could encourage Hamas to take the same path more quickly.

¶11. (C) Danin stressed that now is not the time to moderate the international community's position on the three conditions. Fatah needs to use this time wisely to consolidate their support and take measures to reform their party. Additionally, Abu Mazen and other Fatah leaders have said the pressure is helping them move Hamas to a negotiated solution.

Toward Full Implementation of 1701

¶12. (C) On Lebanon Danin pressed the Italians on ways to strengthen UNSCR 1701 implementation and discussed possibly setting up an informal contact group to discuss technical aspects of doing so. The Italians were receptive, but suggested broadening the mandate (see reftel). Danin also suggested exploring an air-UNIFIL option to discourage Israeli overflights, establishing a UN Sanctions committee to enforce the 1701 arms embargo, exploring the Italian proposal for border monitors on the Syrian border, expanding UNIIC's mandate to include recent bus bombings in Bikfaya and the importance of moving forward with establishment of the Hariri

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Tribunal as soon as possible.

¶13. (C) Mideast DG Ragaglini thanked Danin for sharing U.S. intelligence and said he would appreciate opening a diplomatic channel to continue such exchanges. He agreed the problem of weapons smuggling in Lebanon was serious but warned it should not be used as a pretext for Israel to take a negative stand on UNSCR 1701 implementation. DG for Political Affairs Terzi said Italy shares our concerns regarding continued weapons smuggling but noted UNIFIL's effectiveness is directly linked to the effectiveness of the GOL's control over the LAF, and the political will of the GOL. Closer control of the Syrian Lebanese border is desirable, but may not be realistic at the moment.

¶14. (C) Ragaglini reported Syria had not accepted the Italian proposal for even an unarmed civilian border monitoring mission on their side of the border and that Siniora would be unlikely to accept the idea of a UNIFIL or UN presence on the Lebanese side of the border without Syrian approval. Terzi noted the idea of border monitors is further complicated because it would entail a new initiative either on the part of the EU or the UN. He expressed frustration with the EU's decision-making process, which he called

"horrendous" and suggested a more realistic goal may be establishing a sanctions committee. Terzi noted the legal framework for a sanctions committee already existed in UNSCR 1701.

¶15. (C) Terzi said Italy would support establishment of the Tribunal by the UNSC through Chapter VII; however, he thought support from some other non-permanent members might be more difficult. Terzi also said he agreed with expanding UNIIC's technical assistance to investigate the recent bus bombings.

IRAN: Italy Supports further UNSC Action on Iran

¶16. (C) Danin told MFA DG for Political Affairs Terzi we were working on a draft UNSCR, which we hope to table soon. He asked for Italy's help to move the resolution adopting follow-on measures through the Council quickly. He stressed any delay or division among the Council will send the wrong message to Iran and weaken the credibility of the Council.

¶17. (C) Terzi agreed the UNSC must continue to apply pressure and said he had seen a draft of the new resolution and we could count on Italy's full cooperation and support. He asked that we stay in touch. He noted Italy was particularly concerned with the speed with which Iran has been installing new cascades underground. On the national level, he said Italy was working to close loopholes in banking and financial laws while also working for a common EU position which would be effective immediately.

¶18. (U) DAS Danin has cleared this cable.
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